

Message Text

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ACTION SIL-01

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 NEA-10 ISO-00 CIAE-00 COME-00 EB-08
INR-10 LAB-04 NSAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 L-03
NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 HA-05 IO-13
/102 W

-----126705 231154Z /13

R 221703Z FEB 78
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 079
INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY RABAT
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

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PARIS FOR LABATT

BRUSSELS FOR USEC/LABATT

E.O.11652: NA
TAGS: ELAB TS
SUBJ: ICFTU OFFICIALS VISIT HABIB ACHOUR AND CALL
DEPARTURE PRESS CONFERENCE.

REF: TUNIS 1341

1. OTTO KERSTEN, SECRETARY GENERAL OF ICFTU, AND OSCAR
VETTER, MEMBER OF ICFTU DELEGATION, WERE GRANTED
PERMISSION TO VISIT HABIB ACHOUR, NOW DETAINED BY POLICE
FOR INTERROGATION. THIS VISIT ON FEB 21 FOLLOWED A MORNING
APPOINTMENT WITH PRIME MINISTER HEDI NOUIRA. DURING THIS
MEETING, ICFTU DELEGATION REQUESTED WITH URGENCY A VISIT
WITH ACHOUR AND THAT GOT RELEASE HIM AND OTHER UGTT
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EXECUTIVE OFFICERS FROM POLICE CUSTODY.

2. ACHOUR'S HEALTH WAS DESCRIBED AS GOOD, HE WAS
RECEIVING ADEQUATE MEDICAL ATTENTION, HE HAD NO BASIC
COMPLAINT WITH THE PHYSICAL CONDITIONS OF HIS
INCARCERATION, HE WOULD REFUSE ANY "DEALS" FOR AN EARLY
RELEASE, AND HE WAS DEMANDING A TRIAL -- ALL ACCORDING

TO BOTH OUR ORIGINAL SOURCE AND TO SUBSEQUENT PRESS DISPATCHES. THE THIRTY-MINUTE MEETING TOOK PLACE IN THE OFFICE IN THE PRESENCE OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE SURETE NATIONAL.

3. THE STATUS OF ACHOUR'S ACCESSIBILITY BY THE OUTSIDE WORLD REMAINS AMBIGUOUS. ONE PRESS ACCOUNT QUOTED KERSTEN AS SAYING THAT THE PRIME MINISTER HAD ASSURED HIM, DURING THEIR MEETING, THAT ACHOUR COULD OR CAN RECEIVE HIS FAMILY, HIS DOCTORS, AND HIS LAWYERS." (THIS STATEMENT IS UNCLEAR AS TO TENSE.) WE UNDERSTAND FROM ACHOUR'S CHIEF DEFENSE COUNSEL, HOWEVER, THAT HE IS STILL UNABLE TO SEE ACHOUR.

4. BEFORE THEIR DEPARTURE FROM TUNIS LATER IN DAY, KERSTEN AND OTHERS MEMBERS OF DELEGATION GAVE PRESS CONFERENCE AT HILTON HOTEL. ACCORDING TO RELIABLE FOREIGN JOURNALIST PRESENT, KERSTEN WAS ARROGANT IN EXPLAINING HIS VIEWS AND RUDE IN RESPONDING TO QUESTIONS. HE SAID THAT ICFTU REJECTED POLITICAL INTERPRETATION GIVEN TO JAN 26 GENERAL STRIKE AND THAT ACHOUR WAS "INNOCENT OF ALL CHARGES." KERSTEN ALSO MADE POINT OF DRAWING DISTINCTION BETWEEN ACHOUR, WHO WAS NOT A POLITICIAN, AND MASMOUDI AND BEN SALAH, WHO ARE, PLAYING DOWN ACHOUR'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THESE TOW.

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5. COMPARING TUNISIAN SITUATION TO OTHER INSTANCES WHERE ICFTU HAD INTERVEND (CHILE, ARGENTINA, SOUTH AFRICA, AND FRANCO'S SPAIN), HE WARNED THAT ORGANIZATION HAD GREAT INFLUENCE AND WOULD TAKE DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL ACTIONS TO PROTECT LEGITIMATE UGTT LEADERSHIP. NEW LEADERSHIP, HE SAID, "DOESN'T EXIST FOR US." ICFTU WILL NOT SEND OBSERVERS TO FEB 25 UGTT CONGRESS BUT WILL EXAMINE RESULTS OF CONGRESS AT MAY 17 EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING IN HAMBURG.

6. KERSTEN DESCRIBED HIS MEETING WITH NOUIRA AS DISAPPOINTING ALTHOUGH FACT HE AND VETTER WERE ABLE TO SEE ACHOUR FOR THIRTY MINUTES AT MINISTRY OF INTERIOR WAS STOEPE IN RIGHT DIRECTION. HE CONFIRMED THAT ACHOUR IS PHYSICALLY WELL, IS RECEIVING MEDICAL ATTENTION FOR RHEUMATISM AND DIABETES, AND SEES FAMILY WHICH IS ALLOWED TO BRING FOOD. HE ALSO NOTED THAT ACHOUR WANTS A PUBLIC TRIAL IN ORDER TO PROVE HIS INNOCENCE. KERSTEN CRITICIZED FACT THAT INVESTIGATIONS ARE STILL NOT COMPLETED AFTER THREE WEEKS AND THAT FORMAL CHARGES HAVE NOT BEEN MADE.

7. TUNISIAN PRESS FEB 22 CARRIED HIGHLY EDITED ACCOUNT

PF PRESS CONFERENCE, GIVING GREATER EMPHASIS TO KERSTEN'S
MEETING WITH NOUIRA. GOVERNMENT AND PARTY PAPERS STRESSED
NOUIRA'S STATEMENT TO PRESS THAT GOT IS FULLY PREPARED
TO COOPERATE WITH ICFTU. NO CRITICISM OF ICFTU WAS MADE
OR IMPLIED AND IN FACT NOUIRA EVEN NOTED THAT KERSTEN
HAD ATTEMPTED TO MEDIATE BETWEEN GOT AND UGTT BEFORE
GENERAL STRIKE TOOK PLACE. OFFICIAL VERSION CONSEQUENTLY
IS THAT GOT-ICFTU RELATIONS ARE ON A BUSINESS-AS-USUAL
BASIS. KERSTEN HAS MADE IT QUITE CLEAR, HOWEVER, THAT
THIS IS NOT THE CASE. MULCAHY

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: PRESS CONFERENCES, VISITS, POLITICAL PRISONERS, LABOR UNION OFFICIALS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 22 feb 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978TUNIS01343
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780083-1166
Format: TEL
From: TUNIS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780225/aaaaavfd.tel
Line Count: 125
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 65789ed1-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION SIL
Original Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 78 TUNIS 1341
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 05 may 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: N/A
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3513825
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: ICFTU OFFICIALS VISIT HABIB ACHOUR AND CALL DEPARTURE PRESS CONVERENCE.
TAGS: ELAB, SOPN, TS, ICFTU, (KERSTEN, OTTO), (ACHOUR, HABIB)
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/65789ed1-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014